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# History in the Making: The Negotiation of History and Fiction in Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's *Shunkinshō*

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In this paper, I continue along the lines of earlier critics, who have considered the literature of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō in the context of the historical period in which they were written. However, I go further by examining how Tanizaki articulated the theme of history within his own literature, specifically through a close reading of several parts in *Shunkinshō* 春琴抄 (1933). I suggest that the appearance of a photograph in the text points to social and economic factors that helped determine Tanizaki's representation of the tensions between reality and fiction. I also explore how the author uses the trope of blindness as an ultimately vain attempt to escape a world shaped by historical reality. And I argue that Tanizaki's interest in aesthetic beauty should be interpreted not as a sign of the author's successful avoidance of an increasingly intrusive social and political environment of early 1930s Japan. Rather, this interest serves as an important key to understanding how Tanizaki's literary work engaged deeply in the currents of the time in a far more effective and meaningful way compared to many of his contemporaneous fellow writers who were aligned to the Nihon Rōman-ha 日本浪曼派 (Japan Romantics).

**Keywords**: Tanizaki, Shunkin, photography, aesthetics, Nihon Rōman-ha, subjectivity, I-novel, nightingale

The literary career of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō 谷崎潤一郎 (1886–1965) spanned fifty years, from the short story *Shisei* 刺青 (1910) that marked his literary debut, to his last major work *Fūten rōjin nikki* 瘋癲老人日記, completed in 1961. His full writings total twenty eight volumes in the standard Chūō Kōronsha (1966–1970) edition. Critics have tried to make overall sense of the wide array of works that he wrote during this extended period by linking the content and style of his writing to specific historical moments that the author experienced during his life. In particular, his shift from Tokyo to the Kansai region following the 1923 Great Kantō earthquake has become a commonplace way to interpret his apparent rejection of

1 This paper began as a short presentation given at the 2007 Tanizaki Symposium held in Paris, and was subsequently published as "Tsukurareru rekishi: *Shunkinshō* ni okeru kako to iu kyokō" 作られる歴史—「春琴抄」に於ける過去という虚構. I would like to thank my anonymous readers for their insightful comments, many of which I have unashamedly incorporated into my own work.

youthful infatuation with all things Western, and his so-called "return" to an older Japan (*Nihon kaiki* 日本回帰) from the mid 1920s.[2]

In this paper, I continue to emphasize the significance of the relationship between history and fiction in Tanizaki's work, but I approach the theme from a slightly different angle. I still give considerable weight to the historical context in which Tanizaki's writing was produced, but my specific aim is to examine how he articulated the theme of history within his own literature. I will refer primarily to his story, *Shunkinshō* (1933). In the process of exploring this literary negotiation of history and fiction, some broader questions present themselves that I can only begin to touch on within a single paper. For example, what is the difference between historical and literary writing? And where is the "truth" located in Tanizaki's texts when the boundaries between history and literary fiction often appear deliberately blurred?

## Narrative Facts, Narrative Fictions

A concern with the separation of historical and fictive modes of writing is by no means limited to the arena of modern Japanese fiction. Indeed, the theme was of central interest for the American historian, Hayden White. For instance, his essay, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," argues that the narrative impulse in general can be found throughout all human cultures as a means to address the problem of how to "translate knowing into telling." However, a finer distinction is still to be made between *kinds* of narrative, in particular

> between a historical discourse that narrates and a discourse that narrativizes, between a discourse that openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it and a discourse that feigns to make the work speak itself and speak itself as a story.

White is indebted to a Structuralist understanding of the "objectivity" of discourse and the "subjectivity" of narrative, which are defined primarily by a "linguistic order of criteria." He obviously sees things from the perspective of a historian, so it is perhaps understandable that, compared to what he calls real events that "can perfectly well serve as the referents of a discourse, can be spoken about, but they should not pose as the subjects of a narrative," he should feel that "manifestly imaginary events" seem relatively unproblematic in the way they tell themselves.[3] In contrast, this paper takes as its starting point the literariness of texts and the real problems pertaining to imaginary events, even as it seeks to explore the same complex relationship between historical and fictional writing.

In any case, White's ideas are invaluable in the way they throw up all sorts of questions that interrogate my own assumptions when it comes to hazarding an interpretation of Tanizaki's literature. For example, even if my central aim in this paper is precisely to throw a critical light on porous boundaries between historical and fictional writing in *Shunkinshō*, I still take it as axiomatic that the text is fundamentally a fictive rather than a factual work. However, given that there is nothing within the actual text demonstrating that this is *not* based on history, where does this conviction come from? To echo White's words, what makes the events set out in Tanizaki's narrative appear so manifestly imaginary?

2 See, for instance, Keene 1984, pp. 750–53.
3 White 1987, pp. 1–3.

My assumption concerning the text's fictive nature is determined in part by the same linguistic criteria by which White distinguishes objective discourse and subjective narrative. I will employ some detailed textual analyses below in order to flesh out my argument, but my general point is that Tanizaki uses sentence structures that are characterized by circuitousness and an apparently deliberate lack of clarity. The result is that, at a basic level at least, he creates a narrative form that tends towards speaking of itself as a story rather than serving as a vehicle for the reportage of facts. But beyond the materiality of the text itself, my understanding of the text as fictional is also compounded by extra-textual information. As a scholar of Japanese literature, I already know Tanizaki to be a writer renowned primarily for his fictional work, and I am also aware that *Shunkinshō* appears nestled between other fictional texts in a particular volume of the author's collected works rather than in other volumes in which his arguably more fact-based works such as letters, reminiscences, and essays have been brought together. Of course, nothing is entirely certain—even these extra-textual "facts" may be misleading—but on the balance of things the text is most likely to be a work of fiction.

Since I will draw mainly from *Shunkinshō*, written already ten years after the author's move to Kansai, let me begin by providing a brief summary of the text. The eponymous story is the portrait of an Osaka merchant's daughter, said to have lived between 1829–1886, who goes blind at the age of eight, as told by a narrator based in Osaka during the 1930s. The story was written decades after the recorded events, so it would have struck even the reader of the time as an account of an age and culture that was already beyond the reach of everyday Japanese experience, a distant world that could only be retrieved through force of memory and imagination. The narrative is constructed around Shunkin's emergence as a master of the *shamisen*, and the development of her relationship with the slightly older Sasuke 佐助, who first joined the family business as a young shop boy, but who ends up as her companion and lover, and even becomes a *shamisen* master in his own right. As one would only expect of a Tanizaki story, Shunkin treats her lover almost as a slave, with a considerable degree of not unwelcome sadistic cruelty; at least until Sasuke proves the depth of his devotion by deliberately blinding himself. Sasuke's dramatic gesture takes place after an assailant disfigures Shunkin; the attacker creeps into the house at night, and pours boiling water over her face. The couple's last years together are spent in loving intimacy until Shunkin's death, which leaves Sasuke with precious memories of their time together.[4]

The story is written in a style that gives the impression of an historical record of Shunkin pieced together by the narrator from a variety of sources. Indeed, this fictional work is presented so convincingly as historical fact that the writer Mizumura Minae 水村美苗 has admitted to believing that the story was a true account when she first read it. This inability to differentiate fact from fiction is perhaps not so surprising since she spent her teenage years at high school in the United States; the world of Japan and Japanese literature must have had a distant and indeterminate quality for her at the time. But Mizumura is not the only reader to be taken in by the apparently factual basis of the text. It seems that quite a few readers in Japan continue to visit temples in Osaka in search of the spot where Shunkin

4 *Shunkinshō*, pp. 493–555.

and Sasuke are supposed to have been buried.[5] But before moving on to an examination of why Tanizaki should have chosen to produce a literary text in such a way, it might be useful to reflect on a few general observations about the two categories of history and literature.

## The Categories of History and Literature

Haruo Shirane has pointed out that, in Western cultures, literature was a term that once meant anything related to reading and writing, and this included the field of history. It was only from the mid eighteenth century that its meaning narrowed down mainly to the sphere of creative or imaginative writing, thus excluding the more "objective" discipline of historical writing. In the course of the Meiji period, the term *bungaku* 文学 also first embraced a wide notion of literature as the humanities or *belles letters*—an understanding that drew not only from newly imported European ideas but also from earlier Japanese and Chinese concepts of literature and learning that also incorporated historical writings. By the second half of Meiji, however, *bungaku* too had generally come to be interpreted in the narrower sense of imaginative writing. This more restrictive meaning may be linked to the rise of the novel as the dominant literary form from the 1880s. As a sign of this ontological shift, the University of Tokyo began to teach Japanese literature and history as separate disciplines from 1888.[6]

If Shirane is addressing the history of literature's emergence as a separate discipline, Linda Hutcheon muddies the water by insisting that, from a postmodernist perspective, history and literature are best characterized more by their similarities than by their differences, since they may both be understood as forms of narrative driven by the common denominators of "teleology, causality, [and] continuity." Both disciplines, she asserts, derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality.[7]

In other words, Hutcheon emphasizes continuity rather than rupture in order to break down the idea of history and fiction as naturally distinct categories. She encourages an understanding of both disciplines as historically specific terms, arising from a set of complex definitions and interrelations that are themselves historically determined. As a corrective to Hutcheon's compelling argument, it might be useful to keep in mind Hillis Miller's assertion that, though history writing and fictional narratives may be closely related, histories stand out in the way they "submit themselves to history and claim to represent things that really happened *exactly* as they really happened."[8] Yet, by highlighting the two disciplines as endowed with ambiguous and porous qualities, Hutcheon undoubtedly opens a critical approach that can be fruitfully applied to a reading of *Shunkinshō*.

5 Mizumura 2009, p. 165. Of course, it may be that even when readers know that they are reading a fictional work, they still feel moved to try and find the actual location in real life. A good example of this in the English literary tradition is Arthur Conan Doyle's series of detective stories centered round the life of Sherlock Holmes. Holmes' fictional address of 221b Baker Street, London, proved such a draw to generations of readers that a physical location was eventually created in order to satisfy the demand.

6 Shirane 2000, pp. 5–7.

7 Hutcheon 1988, p. 105.

8 Miller 1995, p. 68.

A parallel blurring of the definitions of history and literature can be explored in *Shunkinshō* through attention to the way in which Tanizaki establishes the subjective identity of the main character. Shunkin's life spans one of the most transformative moments in Japanese history—the collapse of the Tokugawa period and the emergence of a modern state during Meiji—yet remarkably there are no references to such historical detail. Rather, the title itself implies that Shunkin herself should be considered the main subject of the story. However, closer analysis suggests that the author does not construct a stable subject identity so much as he highlights the very impossibility of such a structure. In the process, he also throws into question any easy distinction between historical and fictional writing.

The narrator draws primarily from a document entitled "Mozuya Shunkin den" 鴫屋春琴伝, a formal testament written by one of Shunkin's disciples at the request of Sasuke, although the reader is informed that Sasuke himself must have supplied so much of the source material that "it is reasonable to consider him the real author."[9] Another quite different source of information comes from various observations recounted orally to the narrator by Shigisawa Teru 鴫沢てる, a *koto* player who came to serve the couple as a young maid in 1874, already nine years after the malicious attack on Shunkin. But it is only sixty years later that the narrator gets to know Teru, so her distant memories cannot be considered entirely reliable. Moreover, these very different sources do not always agree, and on more than one occasion the narrator is happy to insert his own opinions about what constitutes Shunkin's "true" history. For instance, according to "Mozuya Shunkin den," the intruder dashed only a few drops of hot water on her face to leave a "tiny scar," whereas Teru insists that a kettle of boiling water was poured full onto her face. In this case, the narrator comes down on the side of the maid's version: how else to explain the fact that Shunkin always wore a silken hood over her face in public from that time on?[10] The narrator's intervention amounts to a judgment that "Mozuya Shunkin den," itself an indirect recounting of Shunkin's story by Sasuke, has passed over the harrowing details of her personal tragedy from a sense of discretion owed by Sasuke to his beloved mistress.

The amount of space Tanizaki gives over to setting out all these oblique references to Shunkin indicates the importance he places on revealing the actual process of constructing her subject identity, so that he seems almost to revel in the presentation of alternative versions of reality. In part, the high value he gives to such imprecision might be understood as a literary technique that aims ultimately to create a more effective verisimilitude. For instance, it is impossible to establish an undeniably "true" version of Shunkin's disfigurement from the textual sources; only the assailant and the victim experienced the event, and their opinions are not recorded (unless the assailant was Sasuke himself, a distinct though unverifiable possibility). But this apparent flaw does not detract from the text's effectiveness; on the contrary, its very ambiguity creates a stronger sense of authenticity. Shunkin's portrait comes together less through a series of incontrovertible facts than through a web of piecemeal, second-hand interpretations that effectively replicate the process by which people's lives actually take shape in the real world. In the way that he weaves his text together, Tanizaki reveals himself as a masterful literary technician who deliberately blurs the distinction between fiction and "objective" history with imaginative embellishments in order to create more forcefully the reality of an individual's history.

9 *Shunkinshō*, p. 497.
10 *Shunkinshō*, p. 544.

However, the ambiguities Tanizaki is at pains to spell out also draw attention to a form of intertextuality that, as Hutcheon points out, characterizes both historical and fictional writing. From a literary perspective, *Shunkinshō* is a fictional work that amounts to a convincing illusion of a life story constructed from interrelated written and oral sources (albeit themselves entirely fabricated). At the same time, the author has chosen to write this fictional work in the guise of history, a style of writing that purports to represent things *exactly* as they really happened. In other words, Tanizaki quite deliberately conflates the two disciplines, and in that sense the text itself may be seen as a nod towards a more generous, pre-Meiji interpretation of literature before the term *bungaku* became largely restricted to the realm of purely imaginative writing.

## The Ambiguous Truth of the I-Novel

But it is also possible to place Tanizaki's concern with an ambiguous subject identity in the context of a wider literary history. The fact is that the whole question of subjective representation had colored many of the literary and intellectual debates for nearly two decades before *Shunkinshō* was written. By early Taishō, the experimentations of the "unification of spoken and written word" (*genbun itchi* 言文一致) movement that started in Meiji had led to a modern Japanese writing style that was almost universally accepted as a commonsensical medium of expression. At the same time, the excited determination of Shirakaba-ha 白樺派 writers like Mushanokōji Saneatsu 武者小路実篤 (1885–1976) to celebrate the self—the key term was "self assertion" (*jiga shuchō* 自我主張)—had struck a chord amongst many of the younger generation. It was not a coincidence that one of the main literary styles that enthused Japanese writers during mid to late Taishō was the I-novel (*watakushi shōsetsu*, or *shishōsetsu* 私小説), a form of writing that took the centrality of the self (*watakushi* 私) as its main topic of discourse. However, this general consensus was decisively challenged and disrupted by newly invigorated literary forces following the earthquake of 1923.

Two major movements arose at the time to offer divergent views about the nature of the self and its relationship with society. Proletarian literature (*Puroretaria bungaku* プロレタリア文学) critiqued what it saw as bourgeois subjective identity, and instead sought to produce a literature that would restructure the world in terms of class-consciousness. From another angle, the Modernist-inspired Neo-Sensationalists (Shin Kankaku-ha 新感覚派) toyed with the possibility of a whole new language to smash what they saw as a complacent and false understanding of self and other, and the relationship between the two. However, by the early 1930s Proletarian literature was crumbling under an increasingly harsh political regime, while Neo-Sensationalists like Yokomitsu Riichi 横光利一 (1898–1947) were seriously questioning what they now saw as the naivety of their earlier expectations. As the decade began, it was the relationship between individual and national identity that taxed many literary minds.

Given the enduring fascination of modern Japanese writers with the tenuous nature of self-identity, it is not surprising that Tanizaki should also have reflected similar concerns in 1933 when he wrote *Shunkinshō*. However, Tanizaki had long been critical of the assumptions that underpinned the I-novel, as demonstrated in a short story published twelve years earlier, entitled *Watakushi* 私 (1921). The title itself is surely a reference to the I-novel that was gaining traction with many writers and critics at the time. Of course, before the

term I-novel came into existence, many narratives had used the first-person narrative voice. However, the new element of I-novel writing was the way in which the fictive aspect of the first person was suppressed and the reader was deceived by an illusion of authenticity into assuming that the narrating "I" and the author were one and the same. On this matter, Tomi Suzuki makes the useful suggestion that the I-novel should be understood less as a particular literary form or genre and more as a reading mode, an ideological paradigm that established the way in which a literary work should be judged and described.[11] In *Watakushi*, Tanizaki exposes the deceit at the heart of this reading mode in order to turn the I-novel conceit of an authentic literary voice and a sincere narrating self on its head. Since the story also offers a way to interpret the author's playful blurring of historical and fictional truths in *Shunkinshō*, it is worth examining in some detail.

Told in the first person, *Watakushi* describes a series of petty thefts that take place in the dormitory of a university preparatory school where the narrator is living with his roommates. The reader is introduced to various boys who seem suspect until, one after another, circumstances confirm that they are innocent. As the story draws to a close, the narrator describes himself in a very matter of fact way stealing some money, when another boy catches him in the act. Confronted by his roommates, all understandably extremely angry, he calmly argues: "Haven't I been constantly telling you the truth all the time? I even went as far as to say: 'I'm not the worthy person you take me for.'" His reason for stealing from those to whom he feels so close is simply that "I was born a thief." And indeed, a re-reading of the story confirms that, although the narrator may sometimes hold back information, he never lies. What is more, and to the utter disbelief of the other boys, he sees no reason why his actions should damage his good relationship with them: "I would like to appeal to your sense of friendship and make you understand that even a thief has feelings for others."[12] The narrator's actions and language throughout the story are cool, dispassionate and entirely rational, although obviously from the perspective of others he has betrayed a basic trust.

Parallels with I-novel expectations are unmistakable, but the manner in which Tanizaki's story interrogates this literary form severely undermines any clear distinction between historical and fictional writing. The title could not make it clearer that the self stands at the center of the action. Moreover, the narrator's insistence on his own truthfulness indicates that he possesses the kind of genuine self that was a major I-novel characteristic. The sincerity that he displays is another key term, associated particularly with the work of Shiga Naoya 志賀直哉 (1883–1971), who was considered the exemplar of the style. In fact, Edward Fowler has challenged the term's appropriateness with regard to Shiga, suggesting he was merely the writer who was most skillful in creating the *impression* of sincerity.[13] My point, however, is that these terms were the basis by which the success of I-novel writing was evaluated, and Tanizaki holds their validity up to scrutiny in several ways.

Within the narrative, the author presents a first-person narrator who may turn out to be a disreputable thief, but the openness with which he comes clean at the end demonstrates an absolute degree of sincerity. And, ironically, the betrayal of roommates whom he still considers his true friends confirms the irrepressible genuineness of his own nature as a thief. Moreover, Tanizaki as author undermines expectations of the reading process itself. In my

11 Suzuki 1996, p. 6.
12 *Watakushi*, pp. 340–41.
13 Fowler 1988, p. 66.

experience at least, the reader continues to believe in the narrator's innocence even as evidence to the contrary begins to stack up, until the final dénouement inevitably exposes the reader's gullibility. This betrayal would rupture the bond of trust normally assumed between any reader and writer, but its effect is particularly devastating from the perspective of I-novel fiction, for which such trust is absolutely fundamental. It would be wrong to overemphasize the comparison here. After all, the I-novel is underpinned by the conceit that no gap exists between author and narrating subject, whereas most readers come to a Tanizaki story with the expectation that even a story told in the first person would be a work of imaginative fiction. However, viewed as a critique of I-novel writing, *Watakushi* casts a powerful light on any clear demarcation between historical and fictional writing.

In particular, it is generally assumed that the I-novel represents things as they really happened, and in that sense it comes close to overlapping with Hillis Miller's definition of historical writing. However, Tanizaki poses questions that resist any such simple categorization. Can a narrator who steals really be sincere? Is it reasonable to expect the narrator to receive sympathy and continuing friendship from his roommates for the simple reason that he is genuinely a thief? The dumbfounded reaction of the other boys would suggest not, and yet the narrator's openhearted entreaty obviously arises from an entirely different viewpoint. Moreover, by highlighting divergent expectations between narrator and his roommates, as well as between reader and writer, Tanizaki refutes the mantle of authenticity and access to a single, true and sincere literary style that I-novel exponents claimed as their own. The irony is that, by exposing the inherent contradictions of the I-novel, Tanizaki's fictional story ends up presenting a more sincere and genuine impression of reality than the I-novel itself.

## More to the Photograph than Meets the Eye

In *Shunkinshō*, it is through a photograph of Shunkin that Tanizaki explores this fine distinction between fictional and historical representation. At first sight, the photograph's existence would seem to provide an opportunity to fix Shunkin as a verifiable image, as the sign of a unique individual rooted in her own history. However, Tanizaki's text undermines this assumption; in his hands, the photograph does not confirm Shunkin's presence so much as it brings to light a set of ambiguities surrounding the very process of attempting to construct an historically fixed reality in a narrative context.

The photograph constitutes one of the sources of information used by the narrator to piece together an overall picture of Shunkin. Its value is heightened by the fact that only this single photograph exists, but any expectation of gaining a clear impression is immediately dashed. The photograph, taken in her mid-thirties, reveals a woman with a well-formed oval face with such slight and delicate features that they seem on the verge of disappearing. Since the picture seems to have been taken during the late 1860s, it is dappled in places, and faded like a memory from the distant past. Probably for this reason, in this misty photograph it is possible to make out a refined lady from a wealthy Osaka merchant family. But apart from that, although one senses the faint impression of beauty, she reveals no particular spark of individuality.

If this description is disappointingly vague, articulating a particular *type* of woman more than an individual, the narrator's comments related to her eyes are positively misleading. He suggests that her half-closed gaze, typical of blind people, evokes the compassionate

veiled eyes associated with Kannon 観音, the Bodhisattva of mercy. Given that the story goes on to detail her treatment of servants and family members with haughty disdain, and her sadistic bullying of Sasuke, such a description hardly seems appropriate.[14] To make things even less clear, the narrator suggests that even this very tenuous portrait may be telling too much, since "the actual photograph is probably even vaguer than what the reader can imagine."[15] In short, Tanizaki makes every effort to present Shunkin in only the broadest generalities, as a religious icon even, rather than as an individual captured on camera at a specific historical moment.

Through the very ambiguity of this description, Tanizaki not only challenges the expectations that had built up around the relatively new technology of photography, but he also casts doubt on any clear distinction between fictional interpretation and verifiable historical "fact." As a medium of communication, photography points to a completely visual experience, and various critics have suggested that visuality itself should be understood as a particularly modern concern.[16] A common, modern understanding pertaining specifically to photography was that, by appearing quite literally to capture the moment, it could represent reality more directly and "truthfully" than any written text. However, as Atsuko Sakaki notes, Tanizaki's use of the photograph in *Shunkinshō* points to a different conclusion. The narrator employs the pronoun, "we" (*wareware* 我々), as if both narrator and reader are able to view Shunkin's photograph, but in fact only the narrator has access to it. The reader, who can only take the narrator's word, "sees" the visual image only through the text. Moreover, the narrator's assertion that his own words probably exaggerate the clarity (such as it is) of the photograph intimates that, contrary to the popular view, "the visual is no more definitive of an image than the textual. The narrator thus disputes photography's claim to absolute truth."[17] In other words, Tanizaki refuses to present the photograph as a medium uniquely capable of cutting through the relative obscurity of words and "proving" the individual existence of Shunkin.

Tanizaki's unwillingness to endorse the photograph as the single, authentic version of Shunkin does more than confirm his preference for ambiguity as a key to producing a more convincing overall picture. By suggesting that words are at least as effective a means of portraying Shunkin, he clearly rejects the common tendency to privilege the photograph as a sign of verifiable fact. However, if the photograph fails to convey the historical reality of Shunkin, the narrator's words hardly present a sharper image. Where, then, is the "true" portrait of Shunkin to be found? One answer might lie in greater attention to the actual process of textual representation. In this connection, some thoughts by Gregory Golley, on the nature of the link between photograph and photographed object, are useful. Drawing on work by the film theorist, André Bazin, Golley highlights a disembodied aspect of the object presented in the photograph:

14 Atsuko Sakaki makes much the same point. See Sakaki 2010, pp. 385–86.

15 *Shunkinshō*, pp. 498–99.

16 For instance, Maeda Ai's literary studies extended to a wide range of subjects—from panoramas and film to the layout of urban spaces—but they all shared an interest in visuality as a defining feature of Japanese modernity. Maeda 2004, p. 3.

17 Sakaki 2010, p. 386.

> What Bazin sees captured in the photograph, in other words, is finally not "the object itself" at all, but rather "the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it," which is to say, an *abstraction*. Disjoined from the flow of time and the conditions of space, the photographed object is freed from the limits of organic experience: not an equivalent, but a model of reality.[18]

Seen through the lens of Tanizaki's story, it might be argued that the author actually has no interest in capturing an elusive, "organic experience" known as Shunkin. She exists—if that is the right word—only as an "abstraction" engendered by the text. Put another way, Shunkin might be understood as one node in an intertextual web of language; she is a linguistic construct that negates the rationality of any simple distinction between historical and fictional writing.

It is important to be wary of allowing such theoretical considerations themselves to become disembodied from the material basis on which they are made. After all, Golley does insist that the photograph should be understood as still standing as "*evidence* of the object," if not the object itself.[19] In a similar fashion, Tanizaki's text may demonstrate the impossibility of conjuring up Shunkin as an individual presence, but the story's rhetorical power to convince is obtained from the trace of her (albeit fictional) objective existence. Indeed, it may be tempting to view the text as a postmodernist free-flowing web of words where "history" and "fiction" swim unproblematically in the same space. Peter Crary, however, offers a useful corrective to indicate how words never flow freely, but rather are caught in the currents of a broader cultural and economic history.

In Crary's exploration of the transformative role played by modernist visual art on the position of the observer in late nineteenth century Europe, he argues that photographic technology constitutes an element of a new and homogeneous terrain of consumption and circulation in which an observer becomes lodged. To understand the "photography effect" in the nineteenth century, one must see it as a crucial component of a new cultural economy of value and exchange, not as part of a continuous history of visual representation.[20]

There is no way that the reader can know how Shunkin responded to the camera when she struck her pose back in the 1860s since the issue is not raised by the narrator; the photograph is simply pulled out from the narrator's archive of Shunkin-related details. However, Crary's words do help clarify Tanizaki's use of the photograph in the cultural economy of value and exchange in the 1930s when *Shunkinshō* was written. The fact is that the photograph throws light on Tanizaki's distinctively modern way of reconstructing the past in a literary context.

It is true that the author uses his substantial literary skills to try and obscure photography's recent history as a new mode of visual representation. His depiction of Shunkin's face with its "well-formed oval face" could just as well apply to an ukiyo-e 浮世絵 print, suggesting an unbroken history in which the photograph appears to have emerged seamlessly from the traditional lexicon of visual arts. However, the reality is that Tanizaki wrote this text in a completely new age driven by modern technology and mass produced commodities. As a writer of popular fiction, Tanizaki was particularly successful in producing a literary commodity responsive to the needs of his modern readership. And one need that he addressed in *Shunkinshō* was to manufacture a sense of accessibility to a past

18 Golley 2008, p. 93.
19 Golley 2008, p. 94.
20 Crary 1990, p. 13.

no longer attainable through other means. However, the very nature of the photograph puts the lie to that illusion. If a fundamental property of photography is the mechanical process by which an image can be repeatedly reproduced, the image of Shunkin as a linguistic phenomenon represented in Tanizaki's text is likewise available for endless recycling and circulation in the literary marketplace of his time. In short, the photograph points to a new mode of the knowable past as an entirely modern construct.

## The Denial of History

Tanizaki's literary articulation of history is a complex matter. On one side, his essay, *Tōkyō o omou* 東京を憶う (1934), written the year after he completed *Shunkinshō*, recalls the way he had fantasized just after the 1923 earthquake that the wide-scale destruction of Tokyo might lead to the emergence of a gleaming new metropolis, with high-rise buildings and wide roads suitable for fast cars. While the essay partly serves as a rueful reflection on earlier excessive enthusiasm for all things Western, the very fact that Tanizaki has felt drawn to revisit that earlier mood in his writing ten years later reveals that the thrill of modernity still lingered even in the relative tranquility of Kansai. On the other hand, Tanizaki's literature sometimes displays a yearning to be free from the exigencies of that modern world, to extricate himself from the restrictions of time and place. In *Shunkinshō*, this fanciful impulse to step outside of history is explored through the trope of blindness.

Blindness is a theme associated with various forms of traditional Japanese culture, particularly in conjunction with music. For instance, the pre-modern *biwa hōshi* 琵琶法師 "lute priests," who travelled the country and made their living by reciting tales to musical accompaniment, were frequently blind. The early *shamisen* players of the *ningyō* jōruri 人形浄瑠璃 (puppet theatre) were also normally members of a blind guild. And Tanizaki makes a blind masseur the central character in his story, *Mōmoku monogatari* 盲目物語 (1931). In *Shunkinshō*, Shunkin goes blind at an early age through illness and becomes an expert *shamisen* player, and it is through a common interest in music that her affair with Sasuke develops. However, Tanizaki's attempt to turn away from history towards a supposedly timeless cultural tradition is most clearly articulated through Sasuke's relationship with blindness and the manner in which he attained that condition for himself.

Following the malicious attack on his mistress, the obvious interpretation of Sasuke's decision to blind himself is as an act of heroic and selfless devotion with the aim of never having to endure the pain—or inflict humiliation on Shunkin—by seeing her disfigured face. However, contrary to expectations, Tanizaki portrays blindness as a way of attaining an enhanced state of existence unavailable to those with normal vision. After losing his sight, Sasuke's feelings towards Shunkin are described as:

> flowing together in a single embrace. Memories came back to him of his youthful days when he practiced his *shamisen* in the dark world inside the closet, but now that dark world was entirely different … Sasuke felt that an inner vision had opened up to replace the external world he had lost. Ah, this really is the world that my teacher lives in. At last I can live in the same world as my teacher.[21]

21 *Shunkinshō*, p. 548.

The closet is the enclosed space where, when still a shop boy, he would secretly practice his musical instrument at night with the ambition of experiencing the same unlit environment as Shunkin. Indeed, when Sasuke eventually blinds himself, he is attracted as much to the shadowy nature of this world, with which he had always associated her, as he is to blindness itself as a means to gain greater intimacy with his lover. For instance, the young Shunkin held a particular fascination for Sasuke because she embodied the old fashioned beauty of Osaka girls "brought up in confined and unhygienic inner rooms."[22] It is a similar version of femininity—hidden, reclusive, rather sickly—that Tanizaki enthusiastically explored at length in his essay *In'ei raisan* 陰影礼讃 (1934).

Tanizaki's positive articulation in *Shunkinshō* of enclosed, shadowy spaces contrasts sharply with other literary texts that have touched on the relationship between individuals and their historical context. Almost twenty years after Sōseki had famously informed the young men of Gakushūin 学習院 that their only choice as modern Japanese was to engage seriously with the demands of individualism,[23] Tanizaki celebrates an "inner vision" in which individuality is virtually extinguished and subsumed in a shared experience, made all the more forceful by the fact that Sasuke has attained this state entirely through an act of wilfulness. The author depicts a world of darkness that promises to brook apparently fixed boundaries of time. The intrusive modern world quite literally disappears for the sightless Sasuke, and he is compensated by a deepened intimacy with Shunkin. Furthermore, he gains access to an unrestricted genealogy of earlier blind musicians and artists, and he is able to immerse himself in a tradition that seems to obliterate the gap between past and present.

On the other hand, while there is a certain appeal in Tanizaki's fantasy of blindness, it has serious limitations. In the end it amounts to a quixotic refusal to engage with the world; at best, the author is following a negative impulse, quite literally, to close his eyes to a modern culture in which visuality has come to predominate. In contrast, the role of the nightingale in *Shunkinshō* offers an interesting variation because, while partly reinforcing this aversion to modernity, it goes further by spelling out a more thoughtful and positive critique, and outlining in effect what Golley described earlier in relation to the photographed object as an alternative model of reality.

Negative associations come through in several ways. Shunkin is a bird fancier with a costly taste in nightingales. The large retinue of servants required to minister to the birds' extensive needs is a considerable drain on her long-suffering family who cover her monthly expenses. However, the very extravagance of her hobby might be seen as a defiant challenge to an age in which value is generally determined in financial terms. Moreover, the manner of the birds' naming suggests a blurring of fixed individual entities rooted in historical time, in a way already identified in relation to Shunkin's photograph. Her finest nightingale is called Tenko 天鼓, but after it dies, another bird receives the same name; altogether, she owns three versions of Tenko.[24] This deliberate confusion of identity is a favourite trope of Tanizaki, also echoed in his much later story, *Yume no ukihashi* 夢の浮き橋 (1959), where the narrator's mother dies while he is still young, and the father introduces a new mother who physically resembles the original mother and even adopts the same name. In that text, the son's later inability to clearly differentiate the two allows an exploration of taboo erotic relations between

22 *Shunkinshō*, p. 504.
23 See "Watakushi no kojinshugi" 私の個人主義 in Sōseki 1965–1976, pp. 431–63.
24 The first Tenko is mentioned in *Shunkinshō*, p. 530; the second Tenko, p. 531, and the third Tenko, p. 554.

"mother" and son. In both stories, the significance of specific individuals takes second place to the same kind of amorphous and pleasurable sense of timelessness that Sasuke discovered in his blindness.

On the other hand, the nightingales also provide Tanizaki with a more positive means of engagement, whereby he promotes an alternative, aesthetic vision as a primary tool to interpret the connection between people and the world they inhabit. The narrator quotes a passage from the formal testament in which Shunkin is extolling the virtues of Tenko the Second to her *shamisen* students. While some people might decry the mere artificial beauty of a captive bird, she insists that the call of a wild nightingale pales by comparison. As people "walk along a path deep in the valley in search of the flowers of spring," they make the mistake of confusing the beauty of time and place with the sound of the untamed bird:

> But the sound of the song of a bird as gifted as Tenko brings to mind the tranquil and secluded charm of a mountain valley. The gurgling of a mountain brook, swirls of cherry blossoms on the mountain ridge; all these things rise up in your mind's eye. Blossoms and mist are contained within its song, and we forget that we live in a dusty city. This is how artifice challenges the landscape of nature. And here lies the secret of music.[25]

No matter how extraordinary the natural surroundings in which the wild nightingale cries out, its sound constitutes an inferior version of reality because it has yet to be rechanneled into a sublime experience through art. As with the photograph, the nightingale's cry gains value and significance not through any organic experience, but through its existence as an abstraction with only a tangential relation to nature in the raw. It is only the captive bird's song—namely, nature reconfigured by art—that has the power to infuse and overcome the dull, everyday reality of the "dusty city."

Tanizaki's insistence on the primacy of an aesthetic viewpoint is key to an understanding of *Shunkinshō*, and speaks fundamentally of the way he understands the relation between historical and fictional writing. This becomes clearer when considering Shunkin's advice to her students that insight into the relationship between art and nature also opens the secret of music. Given the author's overlapping interests in blindness and music, this connection is not so surprising. Just as the captive nightingale perfects its voice through tireless training by its owner, well-crafted music only emerges after intensive repetition and practice. However, the point is pushed further at a moment in the text where one aesthetic form is played off against the other. The reader is informed that Shunkin's best song was probably "Shun'ō den" 春鶯囀 composed after hearing the voice of her beloved Tenko the Third. The song replicates the bird's imaginary flight from valley to valley:

> With the onset of springtime when the snow—the frozen tears of nightingales—starts to melt deep in the valley, there is the murmuring of swollen streams, the sound of the eastern wind pass through pines, fields and mountains covered in mist, the plum blossom fragrance, clouds of cherry blossom … As she played her song, Tenko's joyous and full throated voice joined in, straining to compete with the tone of her *shamisen*.[26]

25 *Shunkinshō*, p. 531.
26 *Shunkinshō*, p. 555.

Here is that same secluded valley, outlined earlier by Shunkin to her students, from which time and space had been banished. This time, however, the aesthetic effect rises to another level. Shunkin's song was originally inspired by Tenko's voice, but now Tenko returns the compliment by responding with its own new call. It is as if Tanizaki's text constitutes a stage on which, like an operatic duet, two entirely abstracted aesthetic energies parry and blend in the struggle for a new synthesis. Furthermore, the flowery, clichéd quality of the words themselves represents the revisiting of an earlier Japanese literary landscape built precisely on such language before it was decisively overturned by a shift to literary "realism" (*shajitsu shugi* 写実主義) during the Meiji period. In other words, tied as he is to the age in which he writes—this passage, after all, has all the hallmarks of a modernist epiphany—Tanizaki is mounting a defense of his own literary tradition as much as of his personal approach to literature.

## The Return to History

While one way of viewing Tanizaki's concern with aesthetics is as an ultimately futile desire to sidestep history, it would be wise to recall Terry Eagleton's assertion that, in speaking of art, the aesthetic always speaks of "other matters too." For Eagleton, those matters relate most directly to "the ideological forms of modern class-society" in Europe, but Tanizaki's aesthetic interests should be understood as equally bound up in the ideological struggles of his own historical moment.[27] This argument can be best appreciated in the context of his relationship with specific Japanese literary developments from the early 1930s.

The association of modern life with fragmentation and rootlessness troubled some Japanese intellectuals, as much as it proved a source of inspiration to a writer like Tanizaki. However, during the 1930s, and especially following government repression of Proletarian literature, it was this bleaker diagnosis of an isolated, disabling modern individualism that became a catalyst for a literary revival (*bungaku fukkō* 文学復興). October 1933 saw the emergence of the Bungakukai 文学会, a group that included eminent writers like Uno Kōji 宇野浩二 (1891–1961), Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成 (1899–1972) and Yokomitsu Riichi. They rallied around the call for a renaissance of "pure" Japanese literature that had lost its way, as they saw it, under Marxist influence. This group contributed to a general environment in which the key expression, "return to Japan," resonated. There is no doubt that Tanizaki responded to this moment; *In'ei raisan* specifically seeks to differentiate cultures, as it compares the relative merits of apparently discrete "Western" and "Oriental" aesthetic practices.

However, the extent to which Tanizaki really accepted the feasibility, or even desirability, of any "return" to some purely Japanese experience—an indefinable term, if ever there was one—is highly debatable. There is, for instance, the well-known story of an architect who proposed to build a new house for Tanizaki. Having done his homework beforehand by reading the author's work, he assured Tanizaki that he would create a house in the Japanese style praised in the essay, but Tanizaki was adamant that he wanted a house with all the Western-style comforts.[28] In other words, although Tanizaki is clearly enthused by the concept of cultural

27 Eagleton 1990, p. 3.
28 Ibuki 1994, p. 209.

difference, the actual content of *In'ei raisan* should be taken with a pinch of salt. It presents the same kind of ironic distance and deliberate playfulness found in his fictional works, which suggests he may not be as worried as other writers about having lost his way.

But it was the emergence of the Japanese Romantic School (Nihon Rōman-ha) in the 1930s, with its more serious critique of modernity and national identity, which most clearly sets apart the manner of Tanizaki's literary articulation of history. The Japanese Romantics definitively turned their backs on the western-inspired movement for "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika* 文明開化) that had characterized Meiji. Instead, they sought inspiration from poetry, song, myth and emotion—aspects, in short, of an amorphous "spirit" (*seishin* 精神)—as a means to articulate a Japanese version of literary modernity they hoped to find outside the strictures of Western discourse. Concerned that the modern Japanese condition was fundamentally rootless, the Japanese Romantics employed that very sense of loss, and the nostalgia that attaches to it, as the common basis for collective experience, around which they hoped to develop a new national subjectivity.[29]

Tanizaki articulates his own concerns with the problem of subjectivity in *Shunkinshō*, and in that sense he has common ground with the Japanese Romantics. But it would certainly be wrong to interpret his writings as an equivalent yearning for these broader, vague promises of "spirit" and national subjectivity. Tanizaki was entirely aware that rootlessness—or, to put it more positively, multiple perspectives—was a fundamental aspect of what it meant to be a modern Japanese, and his own "return to Japan" represents a real aspiration to reclaim his native roots. However, the possibility of any form of modernity sealed off from Western influences seemed neither attractive nor viable to him, with the result that the likelihood of tracing some unbroken link with a "purely" Japanese cultural history was out of the question. Faced with this conundrum, the only way open for Tanizaki to engage with the historical moment was precisely to take on board the broken and fractured experience of modernity. And the key to this engagement is through his use of aesthetics.

The question of aesthetics was of paramount interest for Japanese Romantic writers, but Tanizaki had demonstrated his own concern with the subject as far back as 1908–1912, when he was a member of the Pan Society (Pan no Kai パンの会). This group of writers, sometimes known collectively as the Aesthetic School (Tanbi-ha 耽美派), had championed the pleasurable, erotic potential of Edo period literature in the face of opposition from the then dominant Naturalists for whom such a frivolous literary approach seemed inappropriate for the modern age. But even in these early years, Tanizaki and his fellow writers were not simply inspired by a hankering for the past; as Tomi Suzuki has pointed out, the Society was equally drawn towards European fin-de-siecle decadence in their search for erotic fantasy.[30] And this conscious eclecticism of literary influences continued to characterize Tanizaki's writing into the 1930s. Indeed, Anthony Chambers points out that the literary style of *Shunkinshō* was inspired by several Western texts that included a collection of Stendhal's novellas, *Chroniques Italiennes*, and in particular the story, "The Abbess of Castro," which Tanizaki translated into Japanese in 1928.[31] In other words, while the Japanese Romantics entertained the wistful fantasy of simply drawing a curtain over more than half a century of undesirable cultural change, Tanizaki was fully aware,

29 Doak 1994, p. xxxv.
30 Suzuki 1996, p. 163.
31 Chambers 1980, p. 459.

and more than willing to benefit from the fact, that his writings drew from both Western and Japanese literary traditions.

As a man of letters rather than an historian, Tanizaki tries to make sense of his world by consciously piecing together a literary reality from these multiple traditions. In part, he uses aesthetics to confirm his view that things caught in "the flow of time and the conditions of space" require substantial reworking before they can gain literary significance; put another way, the value of the nightingale's call depends entirely upon its reconstruction as an artifact. In a more general sense, the "reality" that Tanizaki represents in his writing is obviously inspired by the raw material of human existence, but it must first be transformed through the literary process in order to become meaningful. In *Shunkinshō*, Shunkin's subjectivity—that is, her historical presence within the text—is unable to stand up to close examination; it proves to be no more than an abstraction, drawn as much from the author's encounter with French literary aesthetics as from an Edo period literary tradition. However, it is the very deliberation with which Tanizaki draws attention to such artificiality that cements his engagement with the broader historical moment in which he was writing.

Tanizaki's predilection for falseness and artificiality in no way precludes him from articulating an important connection between historical and fictional writing. On the contrary, aesthetics is precisely the tool that allows him to come face to face with reality. It may well be that, fundamentally, all history is made up; the plethora of past events are consciously selected and woven together in any number of ways in order to make a particular point. But a common impulse of history making has been to create a convincing narrative, a story that might somehow explain how past events have culminated in the present moment. In this sense, Hutcheon's blurring of historical and literary narratives makes absolute sense. However, the specific problem for Japan, and one that was particularly painful for the Japanese Romantics, was that the decisive rupture since Meiji following the large-scale intervention of the West meant that any pretense of creating an unbroken narrative of what it meant to be Japanese in the 1930s was extremely problematic. In this situation, Tanizaki seems to have refused to go along with his fellow writers and take comfort in the allure of myth and emotion in *Shunkinshō*. Instead, he deliberately highlights the fact that history could only be produced through a willful act of construction. It is his insistent attention to the central role of fabrication and artifice as people *make* their own histories that grounds Tanizaki in the moment of his writing, and constitutes the worldliness of his work.

Thomas LaMarre makes the point that Tanizaki's histories tend to be secret ones, quite deliberately at odds with "the usual narratives of Japan or of national traditions."[32] And indeed, Tanizaki was most definitely a literary man. The flavor of his words and the ambiguous directions taken by his narratives are far too tenuous for any easy political interpretation of the historical moment. Nevertheless, during the 1930s when politics and literature were beginning to overlap in increasingly insidious ways, and when historical roots and legacies were being forgotten, Tanizaki insisted on the importance of pushing literary representations of history to the fore.

32 LaMarre 2005, p. 12.

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